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Meeting with Senator Wilson and Others

FROM: Fritz W. Ermarth  
NIO for USSR

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NIC #04869-85

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27 September 1985

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National Intelligence Council

NIC #04869-85  
27 September 1985

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence  
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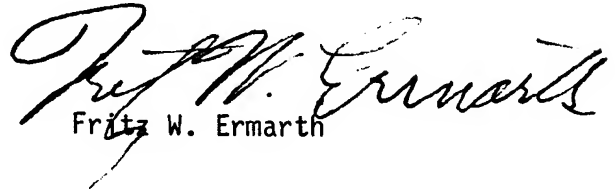
FROM: Fritz W. Ermarth  
National Intelligence Officer for USSR

SUBJECT: Meeting with Senator Wilson and Others

1. I have been invited to make a luncheon presentation on 3 October to a small group of Senators (Pete Wilson, Malcolm Wallop, Dan Quayle, Warren Rudman, and Phil Gramm) on understanding Soviet military doctrine. This is an outgrowth of the unclassified paper on this subject I presented recently to the Ikle/OSD symposium and the IISS (attached). An aide to Senator Wilson heard it and thought his Senator and the others would profit from hearing and discussing it as well.

2. The principal value of this presentation is its exploration of the Soviet strategic mindset and the gross structure of Soviet strategic doctrine (geopolitical factors, mission areas, theaters, nuclear and non-nuclear forces, etc.). These themes give people fresh insights into our own doctrinal and military problems.

3. I've checked with OLL and Bob Gates, who have no problem with my doing this if you do not.

  
Fritz W. Ermarth

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THE EVOLUTION OF SOVIET MILITARY DOCTRINE  
August 1985

I. Introduction

My task is to offer an interpretation of the evolution of Soviet military doctrine.

At the outset I wish to review certain enduring features of Soviet military doctrine which I believe must be kept in mind in order to understand contemporary developments and their origins.

I shall conclude by attempting to identify some of the major problems with which Soviet military doctrine appears to be grappling, the solutions to which will shape Soviet military doctrine in the future.

II. Some Basics

It is well to remind ourselves what the Soviets mean by the term doctrine. In Soviet usage the term is very close to or equivalent to policy. This is the highest level state direction to all implementing organizations on the character of future wars and the manner in which the armed forces of the USSR are to be organized, equipped, trained, and employed to conduct those wars. Doctrine is not Soviet military literature, thought, debate, or

science, although these sources contribute to and reflect Soviet military doctrine. In the end Soviet military doctrine is revealed more by purposeful military behavior than by Soviet statements about it.

As revealed by Soviet military behavior, doctrine embraces four fundamental strategic missions or mission areas. Soviet capabilities and operational practices have evolved considerably in each area, and each continues to present new challenges to the Soviet planner. But the basic architecture of Soviet military doctrine has remained fairly stable since the mid-1960s, even the late 1950s.

The first basic mission area is strategic defense of the homeland, including the political system and its leadership.

The second is military dominance of the continental Eurasian periphery surrounding the USSR, especially Europe.

The third mission area concerns the provision of long-range strategic nuclear strike capabilities. These capabilities are considered dominant in certain general war scenarios, and they loom very large in peacetime power politics and arms control. But they appear to be viewed by the Soviets as very much supportive of the first and second primary mission areas, namely homeland defense and peripheral dominance. Long-range nuclear strike forces provide this support through countermilitary operations against intercontinental and theater targets.

The fourth mission area, more emergent than enduring, is distant power projection, by means other than strategic offensive nuclear forces and beyond the immediate continental periphery. Although distinctly subordinate to the previous three mission areas, it is in part supportive of them and increasingly important to the USSR in underwriting its political role as a global superpower. In this area one should include, I believe, such activities as foreign military sales, advice, and assistance, as well as the general purpose navy, air lift, etc.

This four-pillared architecture is not explicitly discussed as such in Soviet military writings. But it is so helpful in organizing what the Soviets do to and with their military capabilities that it must be considered the fundamental structure of Soviet military policy, doctrine revealed by practice, so to speak.

The Soviet leadership has a keen sense of the political meaning of military power, although it lacks a voluminous literature on this subject. They are indeed preoccupied with deterrence as the first objective of military power, that is, deterrence in the sense of protecting the USSR and its interests, while advancing those interests and the USSR's influence over others, without the use of direct force if possible. Nevertheless, Soviet military planning and behavior rest heavily on the conviction that the real, the best, indeed the only reliable measure of military power is its expected performance in the wars which doctrine stipulates must be anticipated.

This is both doctrinally and methodologically a very important point, even though it sounds platitudinous.

It has a number of implications:

First, it is a reflection of the enduring Soviet conviction that deterrence -- by which the Soviets mean not just war prevention but the power which determines the conditions of peace -- grows out of warfighting strength.

Second, it is also a reflection of the equally enduring conviction that war can occur and must be rationally prepared for.

Further, it leads Soviet military science and doctrine to search diligently and continuously into the probable nature of future war or wars, to anticipate their scope and internal military chemistry for purposes of planning in the face of technological and strategic realities which are always changing to some degree. This preoccupation with the possible tests of real war produces that quality of permanent dissatisfaction, never having enough, so endemic to the Soviet planning style . . . what we call "worst case planning," what the Soviets regard as realism.

Typically, Soviet doctrine measures the elements of military power -- such as a branch of the armed forces, or a military unit, or a weapons system, or an operational concept -- not against the comparable or opposing enemy element primarily, but rather in terms of their contribution to the complex

chemistry of military success at the tactical, operational, or strategic levels. This is combined arms thinking in the broadest sense. The Soviets try to apply it throughout their planning and command structure -- although not always as successfully as they would wish.

The fundamental planning problem for the makers and implementers of Soviet military doctrine is General War with the United States and its allies. Called by various names in Soviet usage, General War is a broad concept, embracing much more than a duel of long-range nuclear arsenals. The broadest dynamic phenomenon in Soviet military doctrine over the past twenty years appears to have been the manner in which Soviet planners view this supreme challenge. They have become systematically more open minded in their thinking and open ended in their planning, with respect to such features as warning and initial conditions; and geopolitical scope of participation and operations; the role, scale, and timing of nuclear operations; the role of non-nuclear forces and operations; the duration and tempo of the war as a whole and their implications for command structure and the viability of the social and economic rear.

Most specialists here will appreciate that I am speaking about the role of the so-called conventional option or conventional phase, about possible limited nuclear operations, about protracted versus very short war, etc. But there is something more interesting going on here than the replacement of old dogmas with new ones.

In the mid-1960s, as in Sokolovsky's books on strategy, for example, the overwhelmingly dominant Soviet image of a General War with the West involved sudden or very rapid escalation to allout use of nuclear weapons of all ranges against all militarily relevant targets, including all forces, support structures, and C3. Such operations would be followed by a frantic effort with land combat forces to exploit in the theaters; and the homeland would seek to survive as best its active and passive defenses allowed. The problem of the planner was to provide forces and operational plans which had the best chance of seizing the initiative and prevailing -- or at least surviving - in such a war. Strategic warning, nuclear preemption, comprehensive integrated countermilitary targeting, especially against C3, were vital in the extreme.

Today the picture is somewhat different and more complicated. The preceding apocalyptic image of war and its requirements have not been discarded by any means. They continue to exist along side new possibilities, in part more congenial to Soviet war aims but in some ways more demanding. Today Soviet military doctrine contemplates and prepares for non-nuclear conflict extended in time and space, punctuated, or dominated, or possibly overwhelmed by nuclear operations the scope, duration, and timing of which cannot be fully specified before hand. In other words, the Soviet planner has come to believe he must prepare for a richer variety of non-nuclear and nuclear possibilities in large scale war with the West. The modernization of his forces and command structure allows him to do so. His task is to



provide the supreme command with forces and strategies which drive the chemistry of war in the more desirable directions and away from the less desirable directions.

It is clear from Soviet military statements and the logic of their strategic situation that there are some very undesirable scenarios which must be deterred or precluded if at all possible, although still prepared for.

One is the sudden onset of allout nuclear war in which the enemy has the initiative. The main Soviet hedges against this have been, on one hand, strategic warning and preemption capabilities throughout the nuclear strike forces which allow the Soviets to seize the initiative if necessary; and on the other hand, deeply echeloned, redundant, and survivable strategic strike forces and C3 which deter US seizure of the nuclear initiative by making it unproductive at best, and suicidal at worst.

A second scenario which must be precluded, if at all possible, is a bogged down conventional war in which the mobilizational potential of Western societies and economies could become critical and the potential weaknesses of the USSR's society and alliance structure come into play. The hedges against this scenario variant are: a) maintaining the offensive momentum of combined arms non-nuclear operations, and b) assuring the availability of Soviet nuclear initiatives that could break open the battlefield without leading necessarily to allout escalation and still leaving the Soviets the option to preempt allout escalation if necessary. A third hedge

increasingly noted in Soviet writings is the requirement for a robust and rapidly mobilizable war economy. This rather implies that the "bog down" scenario might not be avoidable.

In working these problems, Soviet planning seems to see new possibilities for success, or victory, in general war against Western opponents that did not previously exist. I say possibilities, by no means certainties. They could rest on rapid success in offensive conventional combat, deterring or suppressing a militarily relevant nuclear response by the enemy until an irreversible fait accompli has been achieved. Conceivably they could also involve the achievement of this goal with varying levels of supportive nuclear operations in the theater, and outside the theater.

We see here some evolution, but also a great deal of continuity with earlier doctrine.

As before nuclear and non-nuclear forces combine to provide capabilities for general war, with a tendency for the cutting edge of usable military power to shift to the latter in the more desired scenarios, although not the only and not necessarily the most likely scenarios.

When it comes to nuclear operations of any real size and military consequence, the Soviets appear to believe in the virtues of the initiative, that is, in preemption, as much today as they have in the past. There is nothing in their No-First-Use position that fundamentally alters this. The

Soviet declared doctrine of No-First-Use has clear political and propaganda purposes. As elaborated by Soviet military authorities such as Ustinov in July 1982, however, it also has some strategic content. It appears to say something about Soviet views of the desired scenario if there is a theater war. It seems also to express some degree of Soviet confidence that the enemy's first use of nuclear weapons is unlikely to be disasterous for Soviet operations, or that later nuclear threats could be preempted if they looked really dangerous.

Defense of the homeland continues very much to coexist with peripheral dominance as a primary strategic war aim. But intrawar deterrence has taken on a new significance at least as a possibility. And less-than-perfect strategic defenses acquire new potential in some of the more interesting scenarios.

The offensive, nevertheless, remains dominant at the strategic and the operational levels, in conventional and nuclear terms. In fact, the Soviets have evolved a strategic architecture in which offensive power is essential for their superpower status. It is vital not only to their war aims and strategies, but to their ability to cast a political shadow in world affairs with their military power, having little else with which to cast such a shadow. Soviet pleas that their military doctrine is obviously defensive amount to little more than a claim that their good intentions in world affairs are obvious.

Further, I believe there has been a good deal of continuity in the synergism, indeed the almost complete coincidence, of the war aims of Soviet strategy and the peacetime aims of Soviet power politics. These are, simply, to drive US power out of the Eurasian periphery, to prevent the emergence of a hostile coalition to replace US power, and to provide for the survival of the Soviet empire.

How have the Soviets judged that they were doing in meeting the requirements of their doctrine in this evolving and in some ways ever more demanding framework?

Certainly, all or most of Soviet force modernization and command structure changes over the past decade or so seem to fit into the framework. They've had to add on big and costly pieces, such as their entire force posture against the PRC. They've gotten drawn into a big and costly war on their periphery, in Afghanistan. This war may teach them some useful operational and technical lessons; and it could eventually gain them some very valuable strategic real estate. It is a net debit of some degree to the entire strategic enterprise so long as the war goes on. But both East Asian and South Asian military activities fit generally into the Eurasian peripheral dominance framework.

Most Western analysis, especially that sensitive to the Soviet, as opposed to some other, strategic doctrinal framework, tends to agree that the Soviets made great strides from the mid-1960s to date in meeting the main

requirements of their doctrine, such analysis recognizes, as the Soviets do that, because the unforgiving but uncertain test of military power is war itself, the Soviet planner always faces frightening inadequacies in his human and material posture which must be worked on continuously, and which constantly challenge confidence in sufficiency. The Soviets, in short, work against very demanding doctrines.

Unfortunately, I cannot cite for you here a definitive Soviet net assessment of the overall strategic military balance seen in the framework of Soviet doctrine. Nevertheless, it is very significant, I believe, that from the late 1970s until the present, Soviet military and political leaders have asserted that there existed an "approximate military balance" in intercontinental and theater forces which it is incumbent on all parties to preserve and respect. This claim bespeaks a high, even unprecedented, degree of Soviet satisfaction with what they had achieved -- again one must note, in the very demanding framework of Soviet doctrinal aims. This claim tells me that the Soviets saw in that military correlation, as well as the dynamic trends on both sides likely then to define its future, a situation in which they could more than previously expect to achieve their strategic aims in war and, backed by military power, their political aims in peacetime: namely, the removal of US power from the Eurasian rimland and the preservation of the Soviet empire.

### III. Current Military Developments

There is no standing still for Soviet doctrine and planning since the dialectic operates permanently in military affairs. Even if the prevailing situation and prospective trends are favorable, the tasks of military construction must proceed on doctrinal first principles lest opportunities be lost, uncertainties left unmanaged, and the adversary given undue breathing space.

Little purpose would be served by my attempting to list the many force modernization programs underway or impending in the USSR today. Most of them are well known to this audience from official and private publications. The not-very-remarkable point I want to leave you with is that all these programs clearly fit into and service the doctrinal framework I attempted to describe earlier. We see, in short, no fundamental shift of the Soviet doctrinal architecture . . . in observed military activities at least, although there is continued evolution.

In the area of strategic homeland defense, the Soviets continue to modernize their air defenses especially against low altitude targets. They continue to develop the passive defense capabilities centered heavily on leadership and command protection. They continue to work on the technologies and forces for defense against the ballistic missile submarine. Modernization of the Moscow ABM system, construction of the Krasnoyarsk radar, and development of other ABM hardware has given the USSR an option for rapid

deployment of an area ABM defense for major strategic regions of the USSR, which would be particularly consequential in dealing with and controlling some of the general war scenarios Soviet doctrine seems to allow for. Whether or not the Soviets ever made any decision to eventually break or creep out of the ABM treaty is an open question. They certainly have worked on the option to do so. But now the US Strategic Defense Initiative has changed the nature of this calculation. From a doctrinal perspective, the US SDI decision removed the Soviet monopoly on preoccupation with strategic homeland defense. In any case, Soviet outrage over SDI is such as to suggest that it seriously upsets their expectations and plans in this area.

Soviet general purpose forces for dominance of the continental periphery, especially opposite NATO, are undergoing complex modernization of equipment, structure, command, and operational doctrine which is hard to summarize. The overall intent of these programs is quite clear, however: To assure as much as possible the forward momentum of offensive operations in the face of NATO's force modernization, and to give Soviet forces more logistic sustainability in conventional operations.

Soviet strategic offensive strike forces are developing primarily in the direction of survivability and flexibility. Survivability is being enhanced mainly with mobility for land and sea-based strike forces. Flexibility comes from the survivability of large weapons numbers, increased accuracy, and systems and C3 capabilities that facilitate a broader range of military options and discrimination. Whatever the Soviets may say in public about

the inevitability of this or that form of escalation in a central conflict, they are buying capabilities which indicate an unwillingness to get boxed into any particular scenario by enemy initiative.

For reason of time I must neglect the fourth pillar of the Soviet doctrinal architecture, distant power projection, except to note that this is a dynamic area of continuing and probably growing importance to Soviet planning.

#### IV. Future Problems

The Soviet military establishment has well developed doctrines, and programs to service those doctrines. But its leaders are not comfortable, evidently, with the outlook for the future. Two in particular have expressed anxiety about basic trends in military affairs unleashed by adversary initiatives which impinge with potentially grave consequences on the Soviet doctrinal architecture.

A year ago, Chief of the General Staff, Marshall Ogarkov stressed the need for some doctrinal rethinking in his celebrated Krasnaya Zvezda interview. Probably with Western as well as Soviet military audiences in mind, he carefully characterized the military role of nuclear weapons as having somehow reached the end of the doctrinal road. Since he was not repudiating two decades of Soviet nuclear doctrine on warfighting, he seemed to be saying that the desirable role of nuclear weapons in warfighting strategy was intrawar deterrence. He clearly was



saying that the cutting edge of the development of usable military power was shifting to advanced conventional arms and, more vaguely, to weapons based on new physical principles.

It does not take much imagination to appreciate that what Ogarkov had in mind was the whole family of non-nuclear technologies being developed by NATO to defend against armor and air in depth, sometimes called the Conventional Defense Initiative, and the US Strategic Defense Initiative, among perhaps other things.

Since his demotion as Chief of Staff, Ogarkov has authored a pamphlet that again touches on these themes. Noting that Soviet planners came only in the 1970s and 1980s to really appreciate the impact of nuclear weapons on warfare as they proliferated throughout the forces, he alluded to a "fundamental rethinking of their role in war, a break in views" as to whether coherent military operations or war in general were compatible with these weapons.

In the same pamphlet, Ogarkov observed that dialectical laws were being revealed in the perfection of defensive weapons against tanks, aircraft, and ships. This required careful study of implications. "It is dangerous to ignore this tendency," he wrote.

None of this is really new from Ogarkov or other Soviet military leaders. What does strike me as somewhat new is the tone of anxiety and the summons to fundamental doctrinal rethinking that accompany these doctrinal themes. The most striking in that vein recently is from General M. A. Gareyev, a first deputy chief of the General Staff and the author of a revisionist strategic tract in the guise of a study on Frunze. At a symposium on the 40th Anniversary of Victory recorded in Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal, Gareyev states:

"We may now speak of a critical stage in the development of military science and military art in the most developed countries. Overall, a new qualitative jump is taking shape in military affairs, connected both with the further perfection of nuclear weapons, and especially with the appearance in the NATO countries of new forms of highly accurate conventional weapons. In connection with this it becomes necessary to rethink the fundamental military-political and operational-strategic problems of the defense of the socialist fatherland."

In his book on Frunze, Gareyev makes an eloquent plea for revitalizing Soviet military science with focused arguments and debates. Should the Soviets allow such debates in their public military literature to displace the propagandistic and manipulative pronouncements that have tended to dominate that literature since the mid-1970s, at least on strategic themes, we may learn more about the particulars of these concerns.

In the meantime, we can, I believe, gauge the future evolution of Soviet military doctrine in the light of two broad generalizations.

The technologies which will be pressed ahead under the US Strategic Defense Initiative and those developing for conventional operations, especially against offensive armor and their supporting forces, call into question the long-term viability of Soviet offensive force structures and doctrines at all levels, and especially their darlings, the tank and the long-range ballistic missile.

Depending on how energetically these technologies are pursued and how intelligently they are imbedded in US and NATO force structure and doctrine, the Soviets could be faced with a formidable challenge. It will be costly to counter: Costly in terms of resources and costly in terms of technological innovation; this at a time when the state of the Soviet economy, demographic trends, and other factors raise questions about the ability of the system to satisfy all of its priorities as in the past. These challenges could be costly in terms of doctrinal adaptation as well. For if the credibility of offensive military power is muted at both the nuclear and conventional levels, the USSR may have to come up with another way to impress the world.

NIC #04869-85

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